

Tapping Toward Healing
Yom Kippur 5782/2021
Congregation Sha'ar Zahav
Rabbi Mychal Copeland

We will next recite the text of the *Vidui*, our central confessional prayers comprised of *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet*. But first, I invite you to find a way to sit at your computer in a relaxed position, with your feet planted on the ground if possible. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. As I read verses from this piece of liturgy, notice how the words sit with you.

Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Dibarnu Dofi... We slander. We lie. We ridicule. We disobey. We corrupt. We are stubborn. We are violent.

For these sins, our G!d, we ask forgiveness: The harm we have caused in Your world through gossip. The ways we have wronged You by judging others unfairly, and harm we have caused through disrespect...through dishonesty in business. The ways we have wronged You openly and secretly, by losing self-control. Through consumption of food and drink, our cynicism and arrogance.

What arose as I recited these words? Some of them may resonate. Others may not, but might remind you of the people in your life who wronged *you*. Did you feel them anywhere in your body? Notice the connection between your emotions and your physical self. Does any part of your body tighten? If you take a deep breath, can you relieve that tension in your shoulder, your back, your jaw, your chest?

If your eyes were closed, you can open them now.

This exercise elicits different feelings and sensations in each of us and I want to acknowledge that this isn't comfortable for everyone. And especially at Yom Kippur, we need to be attentive to when we need to repent, and when we most need self-compassion. But I want to focus primarily on the physical feelings that arise when I read these words. Even if we don't realize it, many of us carry difficult emotions in our bodies.

What are you carrying tonight, a week into this new year? Are you feeling open, or weighed down with the worries of the world, our communities, our families? Are you overwhelmed? I know we're weary from hearing it, but the volume of stuff we need to process right now is enormous. Think over just the past year. It's dizzying. The sweep of infectious disease and related healthcare inequity. Climate disasters abound. Food and housing insecurity. Afghanistan. The effects of living in a racist society and its accompanying brutality. An unprecedented attack on the White House. Add to all of this that many in our community already live with post-traumatic stress disorder, are in recovery, are survivors of abuse, or carry intense guilt or shame around LGBTQI identities, even in our more expansive current climate. We may be trying to balance caring for ourselves alongside the overwhelming feeling that we need to be simultaneously solving the world's greatest problems. The effects of all of this are immediate and will be long lasting. How do we possibly cope with the enormity of what we're facing in the world? And, again, where are each of us feeling this stress in our bodies?

What we feel in the body is going to be processed through the body – in a healthy way, or in a harmful way. How can our Jewish practice be a means toward opening a door to confronting, absorbing, integrating and eventually healing what we’re experiencing right now - that is healthy and constructive?

Let’s return to the prayer I shared with you. The Vidui does not just consist of words. It’s a little harder to see over zoom, but there is a ritual motion that accompanies the Vidui. With each verse recounting one of our personal and collective sins, we tap our chests. OK, some pound. Hard. I have to admit that I always thought this was the quintessential moment of Jewish over-dramatism, “Oy, I’m so horrible!” a moment of self-flagellation, almost abusive, or a show of ritual theater, not necessarily with the accompanying teshuva work, our work of repentance. Why do we do this?

I found an answer in a surprising place. I was reading Bessel Van Der Kolk’s book, *The Body Keeps The Score*, where he writes about his work as a therapist working with trauma patients. He asks them, “How are particular thoughts registered in your body?” Since many report that they feel anxiety as a crushing sensation in their chest, he invites them to do the following, “Focus on that sensation and see how it changes when you take a deep breath out, or *when you tap your chest just below your collarbone...*”¹ Chest tapping, here, is a means to alleviating pain and anxiety! I looked further, and found that psychotherapists like Roberta Temes, who wrote a book called *Tapping Cure*, teach people a method of tapping on the chest to alleviate panic attacks. The practice “helps people access their body’s energy and send signals to the part of the brain that controls stress.”²

Tapping during our most intense Jewish penitential prayers may be our ancient answer to this need to acknowledge that pain, guilt, trauma and even shame live in the body and, therefore, have to be released somatically. The word somatic comes from the Greek for body. Somatic therapies are based on the idea that, not only do we hold past pain, guilt, wrongdoing, or trauma physically. But in order to heal from them, we, likewise, have to address these experiences in our bodies. Katie Cannon, a Black Womanist theologian and ethicist, wrote, “Our bodies are the texts that carry the memories and, therefore, remembering is no less than reincarnation.”³ In Jewish tradition we call this *avodah b’gashmiut*, body-spirituality.

Perhaps our ancestors created the ritual of chest tapping knowing intuitively that this very physical ritual could bring healing and release through *gashmiut*, our physicality. Why the chest? Rabbi Goldie Milgram interprets tapping on the heart as a kind of drumming which is actually a musical practice in many global cultures. She writes, “The body is the instrument...and striking the chest is a form of dancing one’s prayer.”⁴ There are many cultural traditions that understand this spot in the body as particularly important—as a meridian, or energy point, in Chinese philosophy, the heart chakra in Hindu tradition, or *tiferet* in Jewish kabbalistic teaching, aligned with the heart in the sefirotic Tree of Life.

¹ *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin, 2015, p.211

² <https://droberta.com/index.php/the-tapping-cure/>

³ *The Body Keeps The Score*, p.186

⁴ <https://www.jta.org/2013/08/31/lifestyle/at-yom-kippur-a-heads-up-on-chest-thumping>

So this tapping ritual may contain some deep wisdom about atonement. But in the ancient world, before prayers like the *Vidui* were written, what did our ancestors do to deal with the guilt of their wrongdoing? How did *they* atone? They brought a sin-offering, an animal sacrifice to the Temple. I think many of us are just thankful that sacrifices are long gone. But I invite you to think about the power that act must have had. The idea that an animal had to die for something that I did wrong.

When someone brought a sacrifice, something profoundly physical occurred. It was a visceral, or I would say, somatic experience. There were smells of fire and incense, intense sights, the physical touch, the sounds. What was going on in the psyche at that moment? Rabbi Paul Steinberg writes:

“sacrificing a valuable animal reflected the abstract emotional and spiritual process that occurred inside the individual. When an individual saw [their] precious animal slaughtered and cooked, with smoke rising to the heavens, [they] believed and experienced the weight of [their] sins lifted and could return to life with a clear conscience.”⁵

With the drama of these rituals, I imagine that people really confronted what they were holding. All this was a kind of ancient, efficacious magic ritual of letting go.

We don't want to bring back the sacrifices but we are in desperate need of release. Chest tapping is one of the ways our ancestors sought to enact that same transformation *without* sacrifices. Rabbi David Teutsch writes, “The sin offering of Temple days was an act of penance that wiped the transgressor's slate clean. At various times and places, Jews have marked the High Holy Day season with other acts of penance... The act of striking one's chest during the *Vidui* and *Al Chet* prayers can be understood in part as this kind of penance.”⁶

But... aren't we supposed to sit in discomfort on Yom Kippur? Fasting, wailing, wearing a *kittel* to remind us of our own mortality. This isn't a day for *alleviating* pain and suffering, is it? Indeed we take away some of the pleasures of life on Yom Kippur to feel the seriousness of our wrongdoings. Yet... we aren't supposed to carry those feelings around in our bodies for the next year, and the next year. At the end of Yom Kippur, we feel a weight lifted, a clean slate. Yes, we need to sit with discomfort. We need to truly do our teshuva work, delving into why we make the decisions we do. And we need to act, asking forgiveness, figuring out the root of our pain so we can become the people we want to be. We need to act to correct societal wrongs. We don't just get to tap all of this away. But perhaps this somatic ritual helps move us to both relieve *and* motivate ourselves. As author Resmaa Menakem writes in his book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, “for anyone to genuinely address these ...issues, the person needs to address the trauma that fuels them. Without that foundational healing, all other healing becomes difficult or impossible, because the body is still stuck in the trauma.”⁷ That overwhelmed or tight feeling in our bodies actually stunts us and keeps us from doing the work we need to do. Whereas somatic release helps us move forward, and heal ourselves and others through action.

⁵ Steinberg, Paul, *Recovery, the 12 Steps and Jewish Spirituality* p.94

⁶ Kol Haneshama Prayerbook for the Days of Awe, note on p.819

⁷ Menakem, Resmaa, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, p.130

Chest-tapping is not the only bodily, grounding practice that is incorporated into Jewish practice. There is traditional swaying and rocking, bowing, prostrating on the ground as in the Rosh Hashanah *Aleynu*, lifting up on our toes in the *Kedusha*, and chanting. Menakem urges us to utilize such methods in order to create safety and security. He says of his grandmother, “When I would watch her rock, it never looked nervous or neurotic. Instead, it felt like a sacred ritual, imbued with meaning and purpose.”⁸ I mentioned earlier that in our tradition, we call this way of thinking about physical, spiritual practice *avodah b’gashmiut* (spirituality through the body). Rabbi Myriam Klotz, who has brought Jewish yoga teaching to me and countless others, explains that *gashmiut* “is a term from Hasidic spirituality that refers to the awakening of spiritual life through somatic experience. ... the practice of *avodah b’gashmiut* can integrate the spiritual and physical domains into one whole.”⁹

This concept is embedded deeply in our tradition. In our morning blessings, we say *Asher yatzar*, a blessing for our bodies, followed immediately by *Elohai neshama*, a prayer for our souls. Because we know that they are so intricately linked. What the mind is working out, we feel in our bodies. You might even know where exactly your stress lives in your body. And when we’ve experienced pain in our bodies, it is difficult to focus our minds on anything else. For those of you who engage in practices like yoga or meditation, this link is clear. Yoga is a huge part of my Jewish spiritual, embodied, practice- it is another way we notice the connection between our emotions and our bodies.

Somatic, physical, practices are not the only way to cope with difficult emotions. You may need to find other ways to cope with whatever you might be holding. But for me, this new way to look at an ancient ritual has been a revelation. Far from being a way to punish ourselves at Yom Kippur, or put on a good show of remorse, our chest-tapping *Vidui* ritual is a means toward our healing. Maybe even after Yom Kippur, it can be a reminder throughout the year to come, as we are taking in the hurts we know lie ahead. When we are feeling emotion in our bodies, it might be expressly through physical, spiritual rituals that we can find equilibrium. Chanting, swaying, breathing, humming. Tapping.

One of our congregants who does yoga with me shared this teaching. In our yoga practice there is a quite difficult pose called eagle. We cross our arms, one above the other, and then our legs. But another way to do it is to hug ourselves. This echoes a teaching of Rabbi Larry Kushner, “When we say the *vidui*, the confession, we don’t hit ourselves; we hold ourselves.”¹⁰ Find the way you need to hold yourself this Yom Kippur and throughout 5782.

I’ll close with the words of Rabbi Annie Lewis:

Kapparot

Today we have no more High Priest,
No more Holy Temple,
No more live goat to be sent into exile,

⁸ Ibid p.137

⁹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/finding-god-through-the-body/>

¹⁰ Kushner, Lawrence, *God Was In This Place and I, I Did Not Know*, p.80

Holding the weight of our failures.
But we still have this guilt
That lives in our psyches and our bodies,
Some of it earned
In our real and messy human-ness,
Some of it lobbed on us by others.
Some of it multiplying like malignant cells.
Like our ancient ancestors
We need a way to transform our guilt
So we can go on living...
We turn to words,
We turn to water,
We turn to justice,
We turn to fasting,
We pound on our hearts,
Hoping they might break open
Enough to let go of all that keeps us stuck.